

ATTITUDES OF ESP STUDENTS TOWARDS ONLINE INSTRUCTION DURING THE PANDEMIC

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Abstract: The paper examines the attitudes of ESP students about online teaching through the Microsoft Teams platform during the COVID-19 pandemic. The total of 100 students from Academy of technical and educational professional studies in Niš (Department Vranje) who attended video lectures in the academic year 2020/21 participated in the research. They evaluated the instruction and reported on their impressions about online classes by virtue of a questionnaire. The results indicate the possibility of improving online teaching and learning to enable students to follow modern technologies used in distance learning more efficiently to acquire the content prescribed by the curriculum.

Keywords: ESP, online teaching, distance learning, e-learning, digital environment

1. INTRODUCTION

Since Covid-19 pandemic caused the closure of schools and universities across the globe, teaching in-person was abruptly interrupted and replaced by teaching and learning in virtual classrooms and digital environment, so students and teachers needed to adapt to studying and teaching remotely. As a result, traditional education, primarily based on face-to face interaction, was entirely replaced by forms of distance learning. Subsequently, online instruction was organized in digital classrooms through video calls and video meetings between teachers and their students [1].

However, the overnight transfer to complete online instruction was a huge test that posed numerous challenges.

Although online teaching wasn't an entirely new concept, and hybrid (or blended learning), as the combination of face-to-face instruction and digital learning, has been regularly performed by teachers before the pandemic, especially through learning platforms, such as Moodle, complete transition from in-class instruction to fully online classes happened literally overnight and was considered sudden, or even experimental [2]. And since it has been promptly introduced at the institutional level, the teacher ought to provide both synchronous and asynchronous instruction by means of available online learning tools, such as learning platforms or applications, as well as various audio and video contents, reading materials, grammar and vocabulary enhancement, as well as listening and writing tasks for both individual use and deployment in the digital environment.

As a result, challenges for both teachers and learners emerged. Namely, the feedback provided by the students would help teachers gain beneficial information regarding accessibility, motivation, usefulness of certain lessons, learning tools and resources, students' progress or probabilities of improvement, problems they encountered and possible solutions. Hence, the comparison with previously traditional face-to face instruction is obvious and inevitable.

Subsequently, provided the students are fully aware of arising challenges and have the capacity to meet emerging expectations, they can also be acquainted with the deployment of autonomous learning resources for achieving learning objectives and resolving learning difficulties [3]. That is, students need to know how to appropriately use effective resources for facilitating learning, also known as language learning strategies, especially metacognitive strategies [4], [5].

In these unprecedented times, it was important to create positive online learning experience, which won't be stressful, annoying, or frustrating for students. Nevertheless, the teachers have been pressurized to meet the required online teaching standards, and to establish efficient online communication with their students.

In this paper, a questionnaire was administered to ESP students of Academy for technical and educational vocational studies in Niš to investigate their attitudes towards online teaching and learning.

2. DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT CHALLENGES

Digital literacy (digital competency) is a prerequisite for the successful implementation of online learning. In that sense, the terms e-education, e-teaching, and e-learning are widely utilized to describe educational processes supported by information and communication technologies (ICT). E-education is based on principles of cognitive science, artificial intelligence and pedagogy, supported by information and communication technologies [6]. It comprises Computer-Assisted Language Learning in the field of ESL (English as a Second Language), EFL (English as a Foreign Language) and ESP (English for Specific Purposes). In that respect, e-learning (electronic learning) is the use of computer-based technology that enhances and supports learning.

Online learning can be synchronous or asynchronous, where the former refers to students that need to be logged on to follow live video lectures at a specific time each week, whereas asynchronous learning is concerned with students that can access the class material for each week at any time in the digital environment. Although synchronous learning option includes live video lessons and asynchronous learning options exclude any live video lessons, they both might belong to the same online course.

Furthermore, the term *emergency remote teaching* was exploited [7], aimed to signify that the closure of universities did not mean the disruption of the educational process.

3. METHODOLOGY

The respondents were asked to give their observations on online education during the pandemic, as well as educational tools they used. Students filled in an online questionnaire created by means of Google Forms, which was also distributed online. The total of 100 students (54 male and 46 female) from Academy of technical and educational professional studies participated in this study during the academic year 2020/21.

The research was accomplished with first-year students and second-year students by means of a Google Forms questionnaire containing multiple choice questions.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Firstly, the problem of communication was addressed. The following questions were distributed.

Were the instructions provided by the teacher adequate for each task? Were the instructions precise? Did the teacher respond to your questions on time?

Answers for each of these statements were graded through Likert scale, ranging from 1- highly disagree to 5- strongly agree.

The claims referred to online lectures which students attended in a virtual classroom during the pandemic [7].

The teacher sent direct message to individuals in private chats, group messages concerning general instructions, directed to all the students in a course, including comments about exercises and tasks the students needed to fulfill, or suggestions about students' performance.

The results, depicted in Figure 1, are satisfactory, but also show that there was room for improvement considering the quality of communication between the teacher and students during the pandemic. In that respect, the messages and instructions given by the teacher need to be clear, prompt, punctual and concise.

Secondly, as for general attitude towards online instruction, 75% of respondents expressed their overall satisfaction with online classes, while the 25% said the classes were satisfactory in general but need to be adjusted in terms of flexibility and materials. In comparison with in-class lectures, 67% of students claim they are pleased with online lectures as an adequate replacement for in-class education, while 33% of them claim they still prefer traditional classes and face-to-face interaction to online ones.

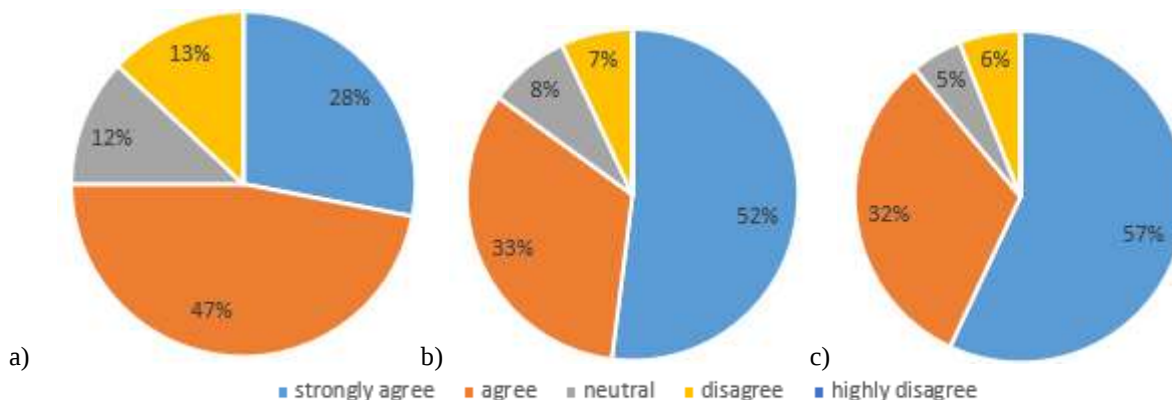


Figure 1. Online communication with students: a) Were the instructions provided by the teacher adequate for each task? b) Were the instructions precise? c) Did the teacher respond to your questions on time?

Considering the quality of online instruction, the next question was about the volume of materials presented during video lectures in Microsoft Teams. The following options were possible: the materials we have received are excessive, the materials we have received are optimum, and we should have received more materials.

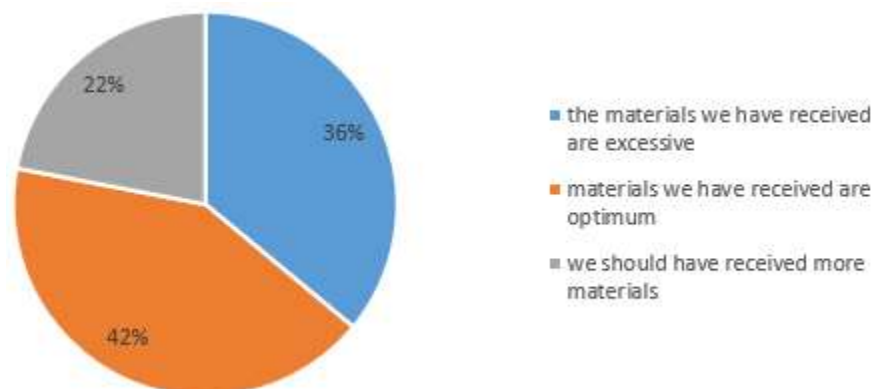


Figure 2. Volume of the materials presented during online lectures

The next question was about the content of online ESP instruction.

Multiple answers were possible. Both contents taken from the Internet and those taken from textbooks were used in the instruction, so both authentic and adapted texts were used.

The following two questions were in the questionnaire. Which content presented during online instruction was the most useful? Which content presented during online instruction you considered the most interesting?

The results are shown in Figure 3. And Figure 4.

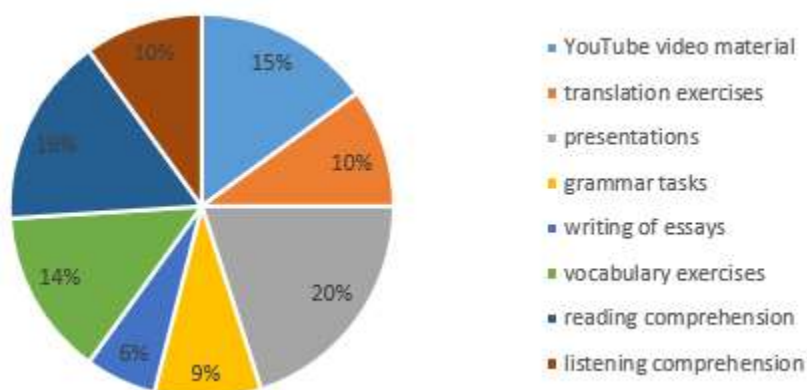


Figure 3. Which content presented during online instruction was the most useful?

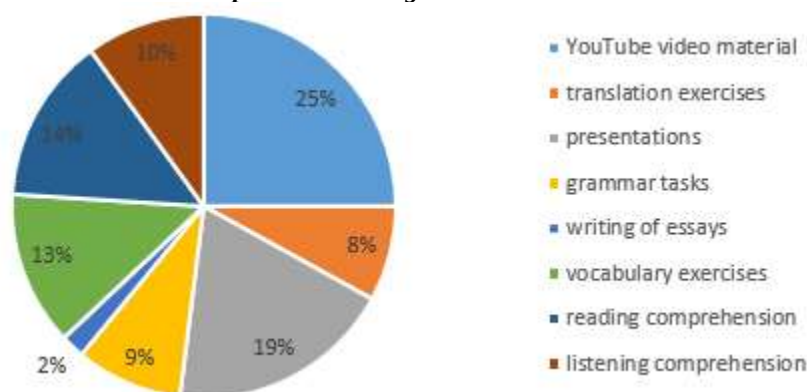


Figure 4. Which content presented during online instruction you find the most interesting?

As a result, both advantages and disadvantages of distance learning were pointed out by the students.

Some research suggest attitude towards online learning can be significantly related to technological competence [8]. In that respect, the drawbacks indicated by the students comprise technical difficulties, including difficulties in sharing their presentations, Internet access, Internet quality, communication problems with both teacher and other

fellow students, late responses from teacher and other fellow students, lack of technical support they needed in certain situations and the fact that their roles in e-learning were not defined beforehand.

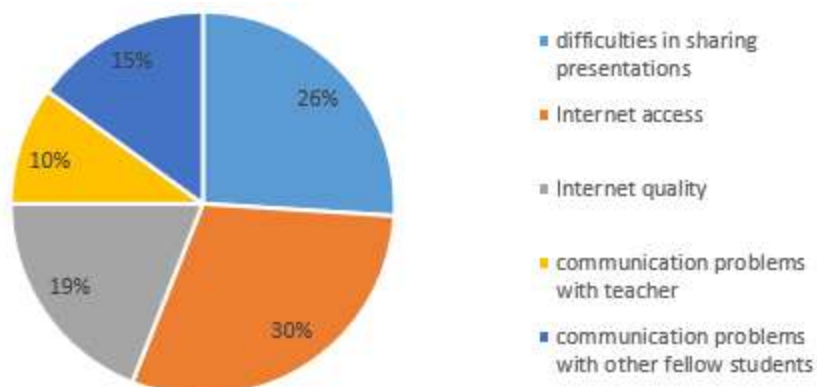


Figure 5. The drawbacks indicated by the students

5. CONCLUSION AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Organizing online instruction and engaging students in challenging times is by no mean an easy task. The pandemic affected the world on a large scale, not only in the field of education, but education also inevitably changed. Even though some students got acquainted with the Microsoft Teams platform for the first time, the need to evaluate students' performance after each online session emerged, as well as the need to assess students' attitudes towards online courses. Hence, an insight into online teaching is necessary for designing the curriculum, either learner-centered or problem-centered design.

This study provided an insight into students' attitudes towards online teaching during the pandemic, inclusive of their impressions, beliefs, and overall experience, which was generally positive. This study showed that students were overall satisfied with ESP courses taught online during the pandemic, in terms of the quality of online instruction, its contents and materials, online communication, as well as the attainments they achieved. Therefore, this insight into students' perception regarding their online classes contains useful suggestions for further improvement of online teaching. Accordingly, students could also learn about efficient implementation of various language learning strategies, including developing their metacognitive awareness about the learning process and the progress they are making, or metacognition. In the future, students should learn how to develop their language learning strategies and their metacognition to achieve better results in autonomous learning. This goal could be one of the pedagogical and practical implication of the study [9].

In addition, the results of the survey could be utilized to upgrade ESP remote teaching, which entails planning, creating digital activities, providing all the necessary material in a digital form, and setting goals for achieving educational outcomes.

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